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Every Mother's Son

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EVERY MOTHER'S SON

Beyond that, what's a mother to do? Say? Say too much and he'll run from hearing like his father. For weeks you plan a meal and invite a nice girl, Ellie, who won't talk overly much, can be pleasant without being a nuisance. You wait, and wait, and she waits. Ask Ellie: "You want more tea?" She nods. The two of you wait. At ten o'clock in he and his cousin Orville stomp, smelling of woods and sweat and dragging their stink to the table like the mud off their boots that's tracked the length of the house.

"Damned if the potatoes aren't cold," Jim says.

"Damned if the steak isn't as tough as a boot," his cousin adds.

Damn their complaints.

To Ellie Jim says: "You sick?" Mooning the weather? Why-in-christ don't you talk?"

Ellie shriveled down in her chair and became no bigger than a pea.

Jim and Orville finished eating and charged back outside to work on their truck.

What's a mother to do? To have a giant for a son, that's the curse. Like his father he is, every inch a Davaz. That last summer Jim packed his father out every morning and sat him in his chair on the porch. "Want a beer old man?" And his father would pour beer down the front of his own shirt. "Want some sugared tea?" And his father would puddle tea in his lap. Jim took no notice. The morning we found the old man dead Jim packed him out to the station wagon, sat him in the front seat, plopped a hat on his head. Away that old man went on his next to last ride, looking ready for a night on the town.

But he's my son too. Twenty-six years old and he should know better. I listened that Saturday night and from my upstairs window I spied them. They never knew, they think a mother sleeps? They chased their sluts around the car, hugged and fondled them right out there in the yard. Jim wrestled with his chippie on the grass, her dress pulled up to her hips.

"He's not bringing her into my house," I said. And he didn't. The refrigerator door opened and closed, then he strutted back across the lawn with a half-case of beer. Off they drove and he and Orville never came back that night. I know what they do, but not in this house, my

house, he doesn't. He knows that.

But does he know what every mother's son should know? Important things left unsaid even in my house, things only a mother has learned, things that would take fifty years of living to tell. But what use is there in saying what I won't and to what he'd never listen. It's in his best interest I arrange what I do. I know the nice girls even if he doesn't. I was his father's wife and know how she should stand. A quiet girl to balance his loudness. A girl who won't think too much of bed not to get up and make it. Fix, tend, help outside when there's a need, a woman to stand as tall as him though she be not so tall. There was the Thompson girl and she had a brother, a high school athlete who wanted a job to work him into shape for football. The perfect opportunity to lead to an acquaintance, I saw it. I drove her brother to the woods.

"You want exercise?" Jim said. "See that hill?" The boy looked where Jim pointed, up to where Orville worked the Cat, a quarter-mile off and six hundred feet up. "Grab a dozen choker cables and run up that hill and hook them to logs. As soon as the Cat's down here with another turn, you just grab those chokers and run right back up that hill."

The kid looked up the mountain again, looked at Jim. "See you tomorrow," the kid said, and that's the last we saw of him.

But a wife she can be found. Our Priest was visited by his niece. She, to spend the fall with good folks living next to the church. She, out of school. She, encouraged to seek employment hereabouts. Again I fixed a special dinner, and again they made us wait. A good girl she struck me as, of course such were her credentials. Quiet, but unlike Ellie for she answered my questions with more than a nod. Half an hour late, Jim and Orville came.

Jim burst through the door first, yelled, "Get some newspaper on the floor. Get out the knives."

Back out of the house he shot. I'd hardly risen to my feet before in they came dragging a freshly killed buck square into the center of the kitchen. "Where the hell's the newspapers? How do you do?" he said in the same breath.

The niece smiled and continued to smile, left her chair to stand near and watch. I should've known then by that look, that grin of hers, like the blood in her veins had lain stagnant a lifetime and suddenly woke up to a world going on around her.

"Standing right out in the field as pretty as could be," Jim said to her. "Where's the knives?" he asked of me.

So the knives I brought out, knives I keep sharp for just such a purpose. They gutted the animal, peeled off its hide. After they had split it in half and hung it in the September air we sat down to dinner, but not before I said to Jim: "Tonight? How could you?"

"She don't mind," he said. "If I ever pass up a good shot, it won't be to watch a priest's niece fill her belly."

The niece spoke a few words and Jim said little to her, as if he had to after his and Orville's performance. Thank God they never offered her the testes of the animal, a big joke with them whenever someone new is around. Orville gabbed, and across the table I glimpsed that grin of hers. I wasn't sure, in some ways I was glad that each had little to say to the other. Even when I met her again after Mass days later I wasn't sure. That look of hers, maybe it was because her hair was cut much too short, that her cheekbones were uncommonly high, such things can distort true feeling. But I've seen that devilish little grin more than once, that child's look upon greeting cake. Just maybe I've been guilty of it myself once or twice.

What's a mother to do when a son runs off, leaves his work early twice or more times during the week, abandons his mother and even his cousin who's almost a brother to drive off into the night. Should I tell him he doesn't know where such things lead, when such things have been left unsaid now too many years? I started this. She's related to the Church for christ's-sake. Tonight I heard him stumble in after twelve, and hours later the report of his rifle blasted the night, ended all sleep. I heard her yell.

She, in my house.

I rose slowly after he'd charged down the stairs, her footsteps following upon his. After they'd dragged the animal inside I found my robe. I entered the kitchen to see the Priest's niece and my son bent over a deer. Laughing kids. As she stooped to help Jim stretch the buck out straight the hem of her coat climbed up her bare rump.

"Get the knives," he said to me.

"It stood in full profile for us right under the apple tree," she said. I stood ready to tell her to leave my house.

"Would you get the knives?"

The niece ran to my cupboard and brought out the knives, as if she'd placed them there herself. Jim grabbed a rear leg and she a

front, they rolled the animal onto its back and Jim sliced it open from lip to tail. As she worked beside him her lips parted to form that devilish little grin, one that promised tongue but gave way only to white shining teeth. What's a mother to do, to say, that this girl sees what I saw, she stands where I once stood. Like her father he is.

"We need a pail for the guts, unless you want them dumped on the floor."

I brought two buckets in from off the porch.

"This make enough meat to carry us the winter?" Jim asked.

"Depends on how many mouths there are to feed."

He laughed.

I climbed back up the stairs, leaving them to their butchering. To bed. This is my house, old as I am old, feeling its age in the hearts of its logs. Even in my house some things are best left unsaid. Yesterday no one talked about the deer killed here or the love made, tomorrow no one will either. And for her too it will seem as soon as tomorrow, she'll find she can't tell their son what every mother's son should know. *The hunt is all of it.*